

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Great Falls Park, part of the George Washington Memorial Parkway located in northern Virginia, is a distinctive place within the Washington D.C. metropolitan region. It includes dramatic vistas of the Potomac River cascading 76-feet over jagged rocks, through a series of cataracts, and surging through the Mather Gorge. It also includes the preserved ruins of the Patowmack Canal, a designated National Historic Landmark that is a physical reminder of George Washington's efforts to make the river a navigable waterway. Adjacent to the canal ruins, the town of Matildaville, now an abandoned settlement, is situated within Great Falls Park. The town was built to support trade along the canal. The park is also located at the northern end of the 15-mile Potomac River Gorge, one of the country's most ecologically diverse areas that serves as a confluence for more than 200 rare plant species and biological communities. Each year, nearly 500,000 people including local residents and tourists enjoy activities such as hiking, biking, horseback riding, rock climbing, kayaking, fishing, picnicking, as well as the spectacular views offered at this 800-acre park.

The General Management Plan (GMP) and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is the basic guidance document for managing Great Falls Park (the park). The purposes of the plan are to specify resource conditions and visitor experiences to be achieved at the park over the next 10 to 15 years. It will provide the foundation for decision-making and the preparation of specific resource and recreational activity plans for the park. The EIS documents potential effects that the GMP will have on environmental resources, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The GMP and EIS are collectively referred to as the plan in this document.

The final GMP will be the first comprehensive plan prepared for Great Falls Park. The National Park Service (NPS) began the planning process in the Fall of 2002. Towards the end of 2002, and the beginning of 2003, NPS conducted public scoping meetings and sent out a newsletter soliciting comments in order to determine issues and concerns that should be addressed in the plan. Issues/concerns that were identified included: access and circulation; natural and cultural resource management; visitor activities; park facilities; and visitor safety.

Based on internal discussions among NPS staff, and comments received through public scoping, the following items were identified as the major resource conditions and visitor experience issues to be addressed in this plan: (1) How should natural and cultural resources be managed to optimize the preservation of both? (2) What are the most appropriate levels and locations for visitor interpretation and education in the park? (3) What are the appropriate levels and locations of recreational activities such as picnicking, kayaking, dog walking, biking, horseback riding, climbing, fishing, and boating in the park? (4) How should trails be managed with regard to use, connections to trails outside the park, and locations? (5) How should traffic and associated elements (parking spaces, time limits, etc.) be managed? (6) What are the most advantageous locations to support administration and operation functions with respect to minimizing resource disturbance?

PROPOSED ALTERNATIVES

The GMP/EIS process requires the exploration of a range of possible alternative future conditions and management strategies for the park. Two alternatives were developed to provide different approaches for addressing the resource conditions and visitor experiences issues concerning Great Falls Park.

The park undertook a second public consultation process in the Fall/Winter of 2003. Newsletter 2 was published in November 2003, where three alternatives for the future use and management of Great Falls Park were presented for evaluation. These alternatives were revised to two main alternatives, subsequent to more than 300 public and agency comments that were received, as well as additional review by the internal planning team. This draft GMP/EIS evaluates the two revised alternatives that are summarized as follows:

- Alternative A (Continuation of Current Conditions) maintains the status quo in the park, and describes resource conditions where existing practices continue to guide park management.
- Alternative B (Preferred Alternative) would balance the protection of natural and cultural resources with the provision of a variety of recreational opportunities for visitors.

Subsequent to receiving public comments on this draft plan, the park will release a Final GMP/EIS where it will either select Alternative A or B as the preferred course of action, modify the alternative based on comments received, or explore additional alternatives.

Description of Alternatives

Elements Common to all Alternatives

The two alternatives developed for Great Falls Park differ primarily in their approach to overall management, level of resource preservation and enhancement, and diversity of visitor services offered. There are, however, elements common to both of the alternatives, which are identified as follows:

- Maintain or enhance significant viewsheds within the park, and from adjacent areas;
- Provide additional protection to natural and cultural resources by reducing conflicts with visitors on trails;
- Improve visual quality, accessibility, and visitor safety at the three existing overlooks;
- Maintain current public vehicular access points and do not develop new vehicular access points into the park;
- Improve the visitor center to enhance its appearance including the courtyard, use interior space more efficiently, and modify entrance ramps to meet ADA requirements;
- Enhance emergency access at Sandy Landing;
- Improve signage to identify allowable uses on trails;

- During severe crowding, initiate a one vehicle-out, one vehicle-in policy;
- Add a “fast pass” vehicle lane and the technology to read passes at the entrance station;
- Develop an Integrated Resource Management Plan (IRMP) to protect sensitive cultural and natural resources;
- Encourage boundary changes where there is an interested property owner and land can be added to the park through acquisition, donation or other mechanisms (such as conservation easements). The land addition would be based on the following criteria: the land parcel is contiguous to the park; it helps to reduce fragmentation by connecting separate portions of the park; it is the site of sensitive cultural resources that may not be identified currently; or, it benefits the preservation of a sensitive natural resource such as Mine Run or Difficult Run.
- Encourage partnerships and volunteer opportunities with interested parties; and
- Close public access to the Potomac River from the shoreline adjacent to the northern tip of the Flake to the northern tip of the Sand Box climbing area. Exceptions would be boaters and fishermen entering at Fisherman's Eddy. Entry into the Sand Box area would be restricted to rock climbers where individuals could rappel in and climb out. No one would be allowed to enter or exit Sand Box using walk down trails. Additionally, access to this area would be prohibited without a permit, or unless accompanied by a park employee.

Alternative A (Continuation of Current Conditions)

Under this alternative, Great Falls Park would be managed as it is currently, with no major changes in resources management, visitor programs, or facilities, beyond regular maintenance.

- Visitor Services – The visitor center (VC) would continue to function as is, with existing levels of interpretation and educational programs.
- Recreation Management –
 - Park Trails: Existing social trails within the park would be evaluated and those that adversely impact natural or cultural resources would be eliminated. The current pattern of trail use would continue, including access to pedestrians, bikers, and horseback riders from adjacent trails and properties.
 - Regional Trails: The park would allow the proposed Cross County Trail (CCT), Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail (PHNST), and Georgetown Pike Trail (GPT) to connect to existing trails within Great Falls Park.
 - Rock Climbing: Climbing activities would continue similar to existing conditions.
- Natural and Cultural Resources – Other than the measures identified under Elements Common to All Alternatives, there would be no changes in the management of natural or cultural resources within the park.
- Traffic Management – During busy periods (currently several weekends per year) park staff would periodically check parking lots and inform visitors waiting in line along Old Dominion Drive to expect delays. When the parking lots are fully occupied, entry into the park would be

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suspended. During these periods, only emergency vehicles would be allowed access into the park. Other vehicles would be allowed access only when there are vehicles exiting the park, and would be managed based on parking availability. The park would continue to provide a manual message board, at the intersection of Georgetown Pike and Old Dominion Drive, which would inform visitors of entrance conditions to the park.

- Administrations and Operations – The park staff would continue to function out of their offices at the visitor center. The maintenance facility would be upgraded at its current location to improve its visual quality at the entrance to the park. The US Park Police (USPP) staff would continue to function from their current location and the stables to house USPP horses would continue to be rented outside the park. The park would continue its use of the existing well water system for potable water supply, including the holding tank on Jackson Lane.

Alternative B (Preferred Alternative)

Under Alternative B, there are several specific actions that are aimed to achieve the goals of this alternative. These are summarized below:

- Visitor Services – The visitor center would be rehabilitated to improve exhibits and establish an educational component that would focus on resource interpretation, as well as providing information on safe and responsible use of park resources for recreation. The interpretive programs would be designed to enhance a visitor's experience and understanding of the features that contribute to the park's significance including the Patowmack Canal, Matildaville, the Potomac Gorge, presence within the Potomac River watershed, and the linkage to the area's American Indian heritage.
- Recreation Management –
 - Park Trails: The park would prepare a Trail Management Plan (TMP) that would inventory all formal and social trails, their conditions, needed improvements, and whether to maintain or eliminate trails. Most of the existing social trails would be eliminated, and the park would discourage the establishment of new social trails through specific actions. The TMP would also explore the potential for realigning or closing horse access to portions of the Matildaville and Mine Run Trails to reduce the potential for damage to sensitive cultural and natural resources. The park would also establish a system of permits to control equestrian access to Great Falls Park.
 - Regional Trails: The park would incorporate the CCT, PHNST, and GPT into the park at potential access points including Difficult Run, Riverbend Road, Riverbend Park, and along Old Dominion Drive.
 - Rock Climbing: The park would prepare a Climbing Management Plan (CMP) that would designate climbing sites. The CMP would also explore the option of reducing climbing sites in areas where there is potential for damage to sensitive natural and cultural resources. The park would designate routes with anchors and control access to the climbing sites through the issuance of permits.
- Natural and Cultural Resources –
 - Cultural Resources: Known buried ruins and other potential cultural sites would remain below ground, except in a few locations where uncovering them would significantly benefit interpretation at the park and not result in an adverse impact on the resource. By leaving

select resources below ground, the park ensures the continued preservation of cultural resources. Also, under this alternative, a plan to stabilize and protect Matildaville would be developed.

- **Water Resources:** The park would provide technical assistance to neighbors on water resource management, including stormwater management techniques aimed to reduce run-off from impervious surfaces and improve water quality. The park would also demonstrate the use of these techniques within the park when improving the visitor center or constructing the new operations facility (at the existing maintenance facility site).
- **Traffic Management** – The park would provide traffic and parking message boards at satellite locations along transportation routes, including Georgetown Pike, leading to the park. The park would also provide a radio announcement that informs visitors about traffic conditions at the entrance station. These measures would inform visitors about traffic conditions, allowing them to decide on whether to wait in line to access the park, or seek other recreational opportunities in the area.
- **Administration and Operations** – Two new facilities would be constructed under this alternative. One would replace the existing maintenance facility and USPP trailer that would be demolished. This new facility would be constructed at the location of the maintenance/USPP facility and would accommodate park staff offices (relocated from the visitor center), maintenance personnel and equipment, law enforcement staff offices, and a holding cell. The park would also construct USPP stables off Jackson Lane within the park. The existing use of a well-based water system on Jackson Lane would continue with an expanded holding tank. If necessary in the future, the park would explore bringing public water to the park’s facilities.

SUMMARY OF IMPACTS

Specific resources and values, called impact topics, were used to focus the planning process and the assessment of potential consequences of the alternatives. The criteria used to identify these impact topics include the following: resources cited in the establishing legislation for the park; resources critical to maintaining the significance and character of the park; resources recognized as important by laws or regulations; and, values of concern to the public during scoping.

The impact topics that were affected by the proposed alternatives and assessed in this plan are summarized in the following table:

Table ES.1: Summary of Impacts

Summary of Impacts Common to All Alternatives	
•	Minor adverse impact on a casual visitor due to restricted access to the Potomac River. Negligible impact on boaters and fishermen. Beneficial impact on visitor safety.
•	Positive impact on cultural/natural resources from improved trail signage and protection measures aimed to reduce conflict with trail users.
•	Potential positive impact on cultural and natural resources from development of an Integrated Resource Management Plan (IRMP).
•	Continued adverse impact on visitor access when parking lots are full and entry into the park is suspended.
•	Potential positive impact on visitor safety due to enhanced emergency access at Sandy Landing.
•	Positive impact on visitor access to the park due to addition of a fast pass lane.

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Summary of impact continued:

	Impacts of Alternative A: No Action/Status Quo	Impacts of Alternative B : Preferred Alternative
Land Use and Socio-Economic Conditions	No impacts on surrounding land uses.	Potential minor, short-term adverse impacts on surrounding uses from potential simultaneous construction activities within the park and construction of proposed regional trails outside the park.
	Land uses within the park function similar to existing conditions.	Land uses within the park function similar to existing conditions.
	Minimal visitation change anticipated in the short term. Over the long term, potential adverse impact from increase in visitation due to regional increase in population.	Minimal visitation change anticipated in the short term. Over the long term, potential adverse impact from increase in visitation due to regional increase in population.
	Minor, short-term impacts on visitors due to renovation to maintenance facility. No long-term impacts.	<p>Positive impact on visitor experience due to: creation of an education component at the visitor center, and the increased interpretation of Matildaville and other resources.</p> <p>Minor, short-term adverse impacts on visitors due to demolition/construction activities.</p> <p>Adverse impact on horseback riders due to potential trail realignments/closures.</p> <p>Potential adverse impact on visitor experience due to potential reduction in climbing sites.</p> <p>Potential positive impact on emergency services due to availability of additional water from expanded holding tank.</p> <p>Potential positive impact on emergency access due to reduced back-ups along Old Dominion Drive resulting from proposed message boards and a radio announcement.</p>
Cultural Resources	<p>Minor positive impact due to elimination of social trails in conflict areas.</p> <p>Potential adverse impact due to continued trail use for horseback riding in the vicinity of sensitive resources.</p>	<p>Potential positive impacts due to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparation of a Trail Management Plan that would explore realigning or restricting horse access on Matildaville and Mine Run Trails, eliminate most social trails, and restrict new social trails; • Creation of an educational component at the visitor center focused on responsible use of park resources for recreation; • Controlled access to AA Gorge; • Continued preservation of buried ruins; and • Plan to stabilize/protect Matildaville.
	Minor visual improvement at the park entrance due to upgrading of the maintenance facility.	Potential positive impact on visual conditions at park entrance due to new facility at location of maintenance building.

	Impacts of Alternative A: No Action/Status Quo	Impacts of Alternative B : Preferred Alternative
Natural Environment	<p>No impacts on geophysical resources, or biological resources.</p> <p>The VC and two northern parking lots would continue to function in the 100-year floodplain.</p> <p>Existing trails would continue to experience erosion-related impacts from current uses.</p>	<p>Potential minor adverse impact on vegetation due to the proposed stables and paddock area for USPP horses.</p> <p>Potential minor adverse if portions of the new operations facility are located within the 100-year floodplain.</p> <p>Potential positive impact due to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of an education component at the VC focused to provide classes/ information about responsible use of park resources for recreation • Enhanced resource interpretation. • Preparation of a Trail Management Plan that would explore realigning or restricting horse access on Matildaville and Mine Run Trails, eliminate most social trails, and restrict new social trails; • Preparation of a Climbing Management Plan to designate trails and eliminate those with potential to damage sensitive resources. • Use of BMPs including in the construction of the new operations facility to reduce stormwater run-off and improve water quality.
	No impacts on air quality in addition to those under Impacts Common to All.	<p>Minor short-term adverse impacts on air quality due to demolition of maintenance facility and construction of new facility.</p> <p>Potential minor positive impact on localized air quality due to reduction in vehicular back-ups.</p>
	No impacts on noise.	Minor short-term adverse impact from noise due to demolition of maintenance facility and construction of new facility.
	No cumulative impacts anticipated.	Potential temporary cumulative impacts due to construction activities within the park and construction of trail segments for the CCT, PHNST & GPT.
Transportation System	No impacts on vehicular access in addition to those under Impacts Common to All. Continued adverse impact on properties along Old Dominion Drive when traffic to park is backed up.	<p>Potential positive impact on vehicular access due to proposed dynamic message boards/radio announcement.</p> <p>Potential temporary cumulative impacts due to construction-related vehicles on area roadways.</p>
Site Utilities	Negligible impacts on water and sanitary sewer systems due to improvements to existing restrooms.	Positive impact on water supply from expanded water tank off Jackson Lane.

MANAGEMENT PRESCRIPTIONS

This section defines all of the management prescriptions that would be applied to Great Falls Park under Alternative B (Preferred Alternative). The management prescriptions define the desired resource conditions and visitor experiences, including the appropriate kinds and levels of management, use, and development that would be applicable to the park. Under Alternative B (Preferred Alternative), Great Falls Park would consist of four management prescription

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zones – Canal Zone, Cultural and Natural Zone, Mather Gorge Zone, and Developed Zone. The four management prescriptions are summarized in the following table and illustrated in Figure 2.3 of this document.

Management Prescription	Concept
Canal Zone	The Canal Zone would include those areas of Great Falls Park that contain remnants of the historic Patowmack Canal and related structural features, including Matildaville. This zone would be managed with the principal focus being the preservation of historic canal resources. Visitor use would be limited to staying on maintained trails and learning about canal features and ruins from brochures, printed materials, and exhibit panels.
Cultural and Natural Zone	The cultural and natural zone would be those areas of the park that have any archeological, cultural, or ethnographic resources related to the park's prehistoric and historic periods, as well as those areas of the park that have any natural resources related to the diversity of fauna and flora in the Great Falls of the Potomac region. This zone would be managed with the primary goal of preserving a variety of cultural and natural resources, some of which include unexcavated archeological sites, the Old Graveyard, Stout Indian Sites, wetland areas, wildlife habitats and areas containing rare plant communities. Visitor access and use would be regulated and mainly dependent upon cultural and natural resource preservation needs.
Mather Gorge Zone	This zone would be located within Mather Gorge of the Potomac River, including the adjacent cliffs and shoreline. The zone would be managed to mainly preserve important cultural and natural resources and to protect employees and visitors. The cliffs, Gorge, and river have inherent natural dangers and are popular areas for recreational users who must have special skills (i.e., white water kayaking, rafting, and technical rock climbing). Visitors would be restricted to designated special use areas and alerted to potentially hazardous conditions and dangerous locations.
Development Zone	This zone is where administrative, maintenance, parking, and visitor facilities for Great Falls Park would be located. The developments in this zone serve the needs of park management and park visitors (i.e., maintenance facility, park water system, and visitor center). These developments would be located to minimize impacts on cultural, ethnographic, and natural resources in the park and provide basic visitor services. The public use areas of this zone would receive high visitation on a seasonal basis and other areas within this zone would be restricted to official use only.

NEXT STEPS

A public meeting will be held to seek comments on the alternatives presented in this Draft GMP/EIS. Also, written comments will be accepted for 60 days following publication of the notice of availability of the Draft GMP/EIS in the Federal Register. Subsequent to receiving public comments on the Draft GMP/EIS, the park will release a Final GMP/EIS where it will select either Alternative A or B as the preferred course of action, modify the alternatives based on comments received, or explore additional alternatives.

The final step will be the publication of the Record of Decision, signed by the Regional Director.